

# Loyola Chapel

ALTAR FRIEZE - MAY 1999

## INTRODUCTION

In my attempts to find a theme for these panels, I was torn between doing something abstract or more modern and therefore less figurative. I finally decided to be figurative and try to centre the panels on images central to our understanding of who Jesus is for us. I hope they will invite us, through the images, to look again and once again, as Simone Weil invites us, to be attentive, or to see, as Christ says in Mark 8-18 "for those who have eyes to see", or, as T.S. Elliott writes in the Four Quartets, see "in which we recognize for the first time where we started". We live in a time where everything focuses on the so called "real world" of media saturation where we are told that because we see it as it happens that we really see. We are so inundated with "reality" that I thought it would be good to look again at our faith images and try to recognize them for the first time. I hope this will lead to not only a new understanding but also a new relationship with our world and each other. This is what seeing is all about. It is about rejoicing in all that is and seeing how it all is filled with God; all of it in all its twists and turns and all its encounters, evasions, contradictions and paradoxes. I hope this seeing happens a little for you and as it did for me as I worked on creating this altar.

## THE RESURRECTION PANEL

The overall and unifying theme for all of the panels is the Kingdom of God as imaged by Christ in "I am the Vine and you are the branches" (John 15-5), and so the vine breaks through our framework as God does — the continuous flow of God's ever presence — and is present in all of the panels. The front panel, facing the congregation, is the Resurrection Panel, which attempts to imagine the meaning of Christ's resurrection.



The images I used are both traditional and contemporary, with an attempt to give the traditional a new, and perhaps truer, spin. For example, I included the image of a rising Lazarus being called forth by this larger-than-life Risen Christ whose crucified hands encompass the whole world. Lazarus is still in his funeral wrappings, implying that not only does the so-called precursor of the Resurrection not equal the resurrection of Jesus (which is more than the resuscitation of a corpse), but it somehow misleads — because Lazarus will die again and will experience Christ's resurrection differently — as we all will.

I have tried to imagine it differently in the Christ's human form — its size — its moreness. Just as the disciples en route to Emmaus at first don't recognize Jesus, then, as he speaks and breaks bread they do, so all the characters on the frieze are open-mouthed in awe and wonder proclaiming what they now see and know burning in their hearts — as the vine that we are (at the same time grapevine bearing fruit, and rose vine bearing thorns) winds its way around us. The struggle to become and to build is an ongoing one (even if the kingdom, as Christ says, is within us, Luke 17-20).

I use some poetic images, evoking the trinitarian dimension that the paraclete will bring us to understanding all that Christ has told us about God. The image that is especially close to my heart is from Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "God's Grandeur", with its closing line, "Because the



Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings". So I have this enormous dove, almost like the breast of the earth, birthing the kingdom over which its bright wings radiate and gather, almost engulfing like an overwhelming wave of the ocean of God's love. It gathers the holy ones of God – the little ones, the outcasts – into communion of the Kingdom. They are all now insiders, with Christ as the central figure, his open mouth breathing the Word – the Word of God, Word made flesh – and his larger-than-life pierced hands reaching and gesturing in invitation. Christ rises from the centre of a fiery rose, encased within a mandorla' as in the heart of God. Mary, the mystical rose, the thorny vine that brings Christ forth, this rosy woman who says "Yes" to God. To quote Eliot paraphrasing John, "the beginning and the end are one." We recognize for the first time that the flame/thorn and the first Rose are Won/One. We too are one with God's creative and saving love in Jesus.

The scriptural inspiration for all this is John 15- 1-5.

## THE CROSSES AND THE PRIESTLY PEOPLE PANEL

This panel is where the principal celebrant stands – with us who are all co-celebrants. While the Resurrection is the central mystery of Christ's incarnation, the prime example of the kingdom Christ came to set into motion (a kingdom within all of us) is understood as a priestly one – "we are a priestly people", as Peter affirms. 1 Peter 2-9

The crosses on this frieze gather the whole spectrum of the Christian priestly journey as a people who gather in worship to give praise and thanksgiving to God, and who do so gathered around the Cross – this glorious symbol of Christ's victory over sin and death, this good sign of God's great love, which is supremely expressed in the Eucharist.



One of the earliest images in one of the Roman catacombs is of a woman at Eucharist standing arms raised in the traditional "orans" position of prayer and thanksgiving. This sparked a moment of delightful intuition in which, because I felt the piece lacked something, I quickly sketched clusters of figures arms raised in a joyful dance of praise and prayer. They are faceless because it is for us to give them shape and face them – lift their arms in prayer – playfully swinging to the rhythm of God's life in us, ever seeking to be more fully expressed and celebrated in our lives as we are called to the Eucharist and the crosses of the centuries.

The first cross, resembling the ankh of the pharaohs, is the Tau Cross, sometimes known as the Alexandrine or Franciscan Cross. It represents the Church of the Fathers, as Alexandria was one of the earliest Christian communities. In low relief is Moses with his "brazen" serpent staff. Christ refers to his being raised on the cross (John 3-14) as analogous to Moses' lifesaving act (Numbers 21-4-9). Moses saves his people from a plague of poisonous serpents by putting a bronze serpent on his staff. They will be healed of the poison when they look at the serpent, i.e., when they recognize that God has sent the serpents because they turned against God. Sebastian Moore, OSB, in his book The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger develops this image similarly in saying that our healing comes when we recognize in the crucified Christ "raised up on the cross" our humanity which we reject; that is, wanting it otherwise. To see this is the beginning of our acceptance of the humanity God gave us as sons and daughters of God - love fulfilled even if flawed. It is a blessing and gift from God. The sacrificial cross is then represented by its Eucharistic signs: the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and its counterpart on the right side of the symbols of bread and wine.

The central cross is Celtic. Reflecting an ancient people who incorporated their story into the Christian story, the Celtic Cross bears the symbols of eternal life, like the ankh that carried the Egyptian story of redemption and the one God, and like the painted crosses of poor El



Salvador brightly coloured with images of peace and light. It is a delightful understanding of the Cross as the bearer of the full mystery of salvation, and one that enables the local enthusiasms for shaping and designing the local Church — as in this case — an echo of its own celtic religious history. It is central in this instance as a sign of the Irish Catholic community of Montreal that established Loyola Parish and the Irish Canadian Jesuits who built the school and college.



The final cross is the Jerusalem Cross, also the cross of the Benedictines. This cross is often used as a call to unity by the ecumenical movement — the Church in its people, religious and lay, prophets and kings, mothers and fathers — God's holy people changeless and ever new. The Cross, like Eucharist and Resurrection, with its ever fuller embodiment in our lives from generation to generation — eternally new — an unquenchable expression of the limitless quality of God's unconditional love.

## EUCHARIST IN DAILY LIFE PANEL

The panel on the right side of the altar tries to imagine the meaning of Eucharist through the scriptural images of the meal. At the left side we begin with a counter image, that of Dives of the rich man's table and sickly Lazarus (Luke 16-20 et. seq.) begging for crumbs from the table. Eucharist is about feeding and being fed, about caring and sharing. We are fed to feed the hungry; it is a meal intended to change the way we satisfy our needs either selfishly or communally. We are to be the cooperators — co-celebrants of the mystery that carries the love of God as food for us and for all of humanity. Feeding not only the hungry but also those like Dives deprived by their own excess, their own misplaced desires, by longings that take them in every direction but God or their fellow human beings. Eucharist tells us that the so-called natural enemies, the excluded, prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners, are first in the kingdom. It dismisses rivalries. It denounces the value and need for



competitive and aggressive behaviour.

The next image is that of the Lion and the Lamb, a favourite symbol from Isaiah of the peaceable Kingdom to come. The lamb is a natural victim meal for the lion who is therefore called to discover his needs differently, sharing the same space. The image is expanded on the other side with a fox peacefully present with a playful rabbit and a tiny rat, images not as noble as the Lion and the Lamb but intended to expand the inclusion.

The central figure is an ancient one of the *Pie Pelicani* (Holy Pelican), repeated in a Chapel window. The myth is one of a mother pelican who, in order to feed her young, rips a hole in her breast and feeds them of her own flesh and blood. The ancients saw in it a marvelous feminine image of Christ as Mother. Her wings encompass all from Lazarus and Dives to the wedding feast and the bridal couple keyed in the arch as Christ's love shared in the Eucharistic meal embraces us all.

The final image to the far right is the Wedding feast at Cana. Mary dances ecstatically at Christ's generosity as he responds to her request to supply more wine to the wedding feast. Is she drunk with wine, or with delight at seeing marriage so wondrously affirmed? Many of the Eucharist stories in the gospel are about abundance. Here not only the abundance of wine but also the euphoria is celebrated. It is perhaps a recognition of the ecstasy of the spirit and of marriage and sexuality and family as symbol of the Church; because while we are constantly reminded of the spiritual call to marriage and its significance thereby of marriage of Christ and the Church, we as Church are quite unable to see the impact of the story vis-a-vis our human love and sexual expression of that love in marriage as being holy and God-filled. Where are our young lovers, husbands and wives in the litany of the Saints? I was intrigued to find that my attempt to frame the couple in an eastern arch turned out looking like a keyhole. Is marriage and family our key to understanding how to be Church?





## THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU PANEL

We are the Kingdom, and our being co-celebrants is at the heart of the liturgical renewal. Yet all the changes in ritual, gesture, language, music, liturgical norms or laws, are ultimately meaningless without the realization in our heart of hearts that what we do when we gather together for worship is elemental to our being as a priestly people. That is what our baptism is all about. We are co-celebrants – celebration is our primary act – it is innate to our being. The Eucharist belongs, not to the priest or the hierarchy, but to God's people. That must become the most conscious sense of self for every worshipper at Eucharist – it is at the heart of liturgical reform. "We are what we celebrate" and the doing is part of the becoming – a becoming what we eat is to be lived out in the everyday, in every life.



This is the sense that impels the imagery of the fourth panel, on the left side of the altar. Here Christ is imagined enthroned on the heart of the vine of which we are the branches. From left to right are envisioned some of the ways in which we

establish the Kingdom which is an earthly kingdom, engaged in everyday life and filled with God's eternal presence. That presence is imaged by angels who are earthbound in that they are both male and female and of various races. They hover, shelter, and invite to celebrate life. The hover over the scene on the left side where, around a baptismal font, a family initiates and celebrates a new child into the family and into the kingdom. The next two images on both sides of Christ are the chapel musicians and choir and this very altar table being presided over by your celebrant. To the right is a pulpit where a community member reflects on the Word of God. Finally to the far right is a simple parable of this community: its children at play, its youth dancing, the elderly cared for, and prisoners being visited: the holy ones of God, not the traditional list of saints.



## CONCLUSION

"I am the vine and you are the branches" is one of Christ's many images of Church, an organic image in which we are all integrally connected to the body. This collectivity that is Church tries to embody in the ordinary things of life what it means to be the body of Christ. We ourselves as Church, the table around which we gather to celebrate that reality, and the very participation in the celebration is a part of the ongoing unfolding of the body of Christ. Our job is to continue the process of becoming, as we live out in our lives the Eucharist together with the other sacraments.

The four sides of the altar frieze have been a kind of meditation in progress on the Christian Catholic life. It is an open-ended meditation, and it too happened in the doing, and was not plotted out as all these words might seem to imply. As our imaginations are challenged as to how to enter into our celebration so that we can more fully embody it in our lives, I do hope and pray that these images will help focus your meditation and give it elan – for a richer and more engaged freedom in God's love.

**Robert B. Nagy**

<sup>1</sup>A mandorla was used by medieval artists to express the unique sacredness of Jesus. Two circles overlap their edge and centre creating an almond-like third space, the mandorla, in which Christ is enthroned.